edited by

jerry pinto

arundhathi subramaniam

confronting LOVE

poems

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CONFRONTING LOVE

Jerry Pinto and Arundhathi Subramaniam live in Mumbai. Jerry's first collection of poems, *Asylum*, was published in 2004. Arundhathi is the author of two books of poems: *On Cleaning Bookshelves* (2001) and *Where I Live* (2005).

Confronting Love: Poems

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Introduction

These are poems of romantic love.

Love in various ragas: from the erotic to the elegiac, the ironic to the exultant, the lyrical to the witty, the passionate to the enraged. There is cerebral love and carnal love, companionable love and love of the age-old cardiac variety. There is the being-in-love poem, the being-out-of-love poem, and the regular harlequinesque tumbling-headlong-into-it poem. And if the emotional thermostat varies considerably, so does the tone: from the muted murmur to an unabashed baying at or for the moon. There is lust here and there is pain; there is passion and memory and desire. There is what makes us human in these poems and there are reminders of what we can become.

The love poem has got to be the toughest to write, says A.K. Ramanujan, in the very first poem of the book. (That doesn't stop him from writing one, though.) What he says is true, of course. The most universal theme in the world holds few poetic surprises. Everything that can be said seems to have been said. Caught between the dire alternatives of whimsy and cliché, treacle and more treacle, the poet has often been known to opt for silence. But the poets in this anthology, we believe, respond to the challenge of the love poem in unexpected and innovative ways. Some of them

engage with the politics of love, some deal with the emotional specificity of the encounter, some refract love through other senses, some don't even use the 'L' word but let that strange complex of feelings run like a subterranean river beneath the text.

Our choices are unapologetically, happily eclectic. The poems here are not necessarily representative of the general tenor or style of each poet's work. We've sometimes dropped poems that have been widely anthologized, because we preferred to look for the unfamiliar option. In other cases, we were forced to drop poets whose work we like a great deal, simply because we couldn't find a recognizable love poem in their oeuvre. In the case of Nissim Ezekiel, we found a plethora of them, but the one that felt right was 'Motives', a wonderfully friendly address to a lover. We could not include it since Ezekiel's publishers refused permission. If you know this poem, please think of it as a part of this anthology. We do.

We've ended up choosing poems for different reasons: because they offer a variety of tones, moods, textures, approaches. Because we like them, because they surprised us and continue to do so, because emotion has not overwhelmed craft. And most importantly, because craft has not driven feeling out.

Jerry Pinto Arundhathi Subramaniam

Love 10

A.K. Ramanujan

Love poems, he says, are not easy to write
because they've all been written before.
Words play dead. The seasons are trite.

Love poems are not easy to write
for anyone present: their lips are sore,
hearts elsewhere, or just full of spite.

And love poems are not easy to write
for absent ones: can't remember any more
the colour of their eyes, try as one might.

Love poems are not easy to write
for the dead: after the stint of sorrow,
ironies of relief, one's stricken with blight.

Turning over and over tomorrow
and yesterday, day is already night.
Love, unwritten, cataracts his sight.

The Stone Age

KAMALA DAS

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build round me a shabby drawing room,
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-
    morning sleep,
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye. And
Yet, on daydreams, strong men cast their shadows,
    they sink
Like white suns in the swell of my Dravidian blood,
Secretly flow the drains beneath sacred cities.
When you leave, I drive my blue battered car
Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty
Noisy steps to knock at another's door.
Through peep-holes, the neighbours watch,
They watch me come
And go like rain. Ask me, everybody, ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavour of his

Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded
snake
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts,
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its
price...

After Eight Years of Marriage

MAMTA KALIA

After eight years of marriage
The first time I visited my parents,
They asked, 'Are you happy, tell us,'
It was an absurd question
And I should have laughed at it.
Instead, I cried,
And in between sobs, nodded yes.
I wanted to tell them
That I was happy on a Tuesday.
I was unhappy on Wednesday.
I was happy one day at 8 o'clock
I was most unhappy by 8.15.
I wanted to tell them how one day
We all ate a watermelon and laughed.
I wanted to tell them how I wept in bed all night
once
And struggled hard from hurting myself.
That it wasn't easy to be happy in a family of
twelve.
But they were looking at my two sons,

Hopping around like young goats.
Their wrinkled hands, beaten faces and grey
    eyelashes
Were all too much too real.
So I swallowed everything,
And smiled a smile of great content.

Waking

VINAY DHARWADKER

And even now,
when a dozen years have passed,
love has nothing to say:
it's simply the day
waking beside you, unaware of itself,
the warmth after sleep and sleep's slow reckoning
of where it has been:
it's the day waking with the light
on the two still interwoven figures we make
as we drift into sleep, drifting through the night
towards the foreseen and forgotten morning
when our bodies stir again,
touched by the sun,
and I lie there waiting for your eyes
to open, two brown pools
that lighten inwards
with recognition.

Leaving Your City

AGHA SHAHID ALI

In the midnight bar
your breath collapsed on me.
I balanced on

the tip of your smile,

holding on to your words
as I climbed the dark steps.

Meticulous,
your furniture neatly arranged for death,

you sharpened the knife
on the moon's surface,
polished it with lunatic silver.

You were kind,
reciting poetry in a drunk tongue.
I thought: At last!

Now I loiter in and out
of your memory,

speaking to you wherever I go.

I'm reduced to my poverties

and you to a restless dream
from another country

where the sea is the most expensive blue.

My finger, your phone number
at its tip, dials the night.

And your city follows me,
its light dying in my eyes.

Prandial Plaint

VIKRAM SETH

My love, I love your breasts. I love your nose.
I love your accent and I love your toes.
I am your slave. One word, and I obey.
But please don't slurp your coffee in that way.

Strawberry Morning

RANJIT HOSKOTÉ

A fruity tang pervades the mist,
Infiltrates the sleeping air;
The sunlight can barely shrug off
Its rug of fleecy clouds;
The streets wear a bleary look
Of improbability:
The clatter of a kettle that a hand hasn't reached
Lucidly suggests that no one
Is conclusively awake yet.

Summoning myself from reverie
I step over the moss to her garden;
See the white chairs bobbing
In the sea of round grey pebbles
Again, after many dawns;
She waits under the spreading tree
For me to cross the pebbled sea,
And the brown eyes, looking up, smile
Before the lips smile.

My lips are a willing mirror. Somehow,
She knew I'd come today:

I cannot fathom how,
Nor particularly want to:
The garden is complete in itself now,
Closed to analysis.
When she comes to the table,
Waves of light bounce off the blue and white
Porcelain. It's a strawberry morning.

Alibi

EUNICE DE SOUZA

My love says
for god's sake
don't write poems
which heave and pant
and resound to the music
of our thighs
etc.
Just keep at what you are:
a sour old puss in verse
and leave the rest to me.

White Asparagus

SUJATA BHATT

Who speaks of strong currents
streaming through the legs, the breasts
of a pregnant woman
in her fourth month?

She's young, this is her first time,
she's slim and the nausea has gone.
Her belly's just starting to get rounder
her breasts itch all day,

And she's surprised that what she wants
is him
        inside her again.
Oh come like a horse, she wants to say,
move like a dog, a wolf,
            become a suckling lion-cub—

Come here, and here, and here—
but swim fast and don't stop.

Who speaks of the green coconut uterus
the muscles sliding, a deeper undertow
and the green coconut milk that seals
her well, yet flows so she is wet
from his softest touch?

Who understands the logic
behind this desire?
Who speaks of the rushing tide
        that awakens
her slowly increasing blood—?
And the hunger
    raw obsession beginning
with the shape of the asparagus:
sun-deprived white and purple-shadow-veined,
she buys three kilos
of the fat ones, thicker than anyone's fingers,
she strokes the silky heads
some are so jauntily capped...
    even the smell pulls her in—

The Ageing Lovers

BHIKAIJI MANECKJI

They move with deference, as being aware
Each that his body is his, and is the other's,
And to comfort the other, must be moved with care.
Therefore no recklessness in their twin motion
Nor passionate haste to undo the other
Into the youthful luxury of possession.

For in the withering night, under the dimmed stars
That makes them old, they must be one another's
Restraint against their acknowledged mortal fear.

Therefore no child's fury of ownership
That argues 'Forever'! they are lent one another
Only until their expression close in sleep.

Therefore conduct themselves with ceremony
Of gentleness, embracing one another
Through a darkness of inseparable love and pity.
It shakes their hearts. Therefore even when they are
Most truly the lips and tongues of one another,
They kiss through losses, and they move with care.

I Would Like to Have a Movie Cowboy for a Husband

CHARMAYNE D'SOUZA

A lean back,
walking into the sagebrush,
with infinite possibilities
of never returning again,
exterminated by an inscrutable
    Comanche,
a stubbled renegade,
or a crook general,
introducing—my husband.

Our lovemaking
would have the sweep
of brushfire,
our orgasms
the crisp certainty
of death,
our life
the aroma of fried bread, beans and hash,
and the guarantee,

always lurking somewhere
in the background,
that the goods would last for only
two or three years,
that our marriage could be
deliciously
wiped out,
like an Indian tribe,
forever.

Enemy

C.P. SURENDRAN

I'd just fought this war and come back
I was minding my own business
And drinking beer.

Then I met this girl
Who wrote poems
On the back
Of paper napkins
With ketchup.

She said,
Show me your heart.

Don't have one, I said.

But she said hearts were what made her go.

Finally, I dug up the old, dark thing.

And she said, oh, but this is a grenade.

I told you, I said, and bit the pin.

Travelling in a Cage
(Section 6)

DILIP CHITRE

In the dark smell of cooking meat
Blindly I lick you with the tongues
Of pleasure and the fingers of fear
In my memory you are a treatise on light
Written in braille
We rocked in the afternoon's empty cradle
Swinging across the night
'O my unbelieving lover,' you said,
'the sky has opened in my blood;
Fly.'

Now I find that love has taught me nothing
I am unable to escape myself
My senses are beasts without forests
My soul is a bird without sky.

Licence

GIEVE PATEL

You tell me of your loves.
I tell you of all mine. An honesty we say,
A maturity. In the middle
Of your account, at the seventh word,
You say I've winced; you halt.
Go on, I insist.
In the middle of mine,
Your eyes so far amused,
Flint distractedly. But I go on.
Our words work through
A licenced unfaithfulness.

But at the end when words have ceased,
Ghosts seemingly washed off our backs,
Who are those clamouring for attention?
Between breast and hand
A strange finger intrudes. Within my mouth
Your tongue resents
A third moisture. Move over.
Leave half the bed
Unoccupied. Our hands should meet
To intertwine.

Antenna

GAYATRI MAJUMDAR

We enter into the sweetest
of the brown cookies,
dig a hole
and make provision for the rains
during the rains.
In this stickthing lovedough
we lock antennas,
sting poison into each other.
Then we about-face: antidote.

We listen to rain
as we eat through the light
on our ceiling:
fatten our sex,
make time in here.
Meanwhile, the bridge
to a neighbourhood constellation
is crumbling.

Mirror-Love

H. Masud Taj

My love for you I mirror-pledge:
Will last although the glass obscures,
Will bask in your reflected rays,
Will turn simultaneously.

My love for you on mirror-time:
Will last although the image fades,
Will yield in all symmetrical ways,
Will move bilaterally.

My love for you with mirror-age:
Will last although the silver pales,
Will fill in all the blanks that stare,
Will age transparently.

My love for you in mirror-sight:
Will last although the lasting gaze
Will rest upon the gazing face,
Will hold unflinchingly.

You Said, I Agreed

ANITA NAIR

Let us be friends, you said.
Let us be friends, I agreed.

Let there be nothing more, you said.
Let there be nothing more, I agreed.

I made no declarations, no promises, you said.
You made no declarations, no promises, I agreed.

It was a minor aberration, a detour, you said.
It was a minor aberration, a detour, I agreed.

It isn't as if I did anything, you said.
It isn't as if anything happened, I agreed.

We came out of it with dignity, you said.
We came out of it with dignity, I agreed.

Nocturne

ANAND THAKORE

Dusk and the ghats were behind us when we
    reached the river.
Summer had drained it of all motion, but its grey
Surfaces were still cold and clear. I watched you
    shiver
As we undressed. We swam, and between the algae
The moon swam with us like a silver
Fish, then sank into the silt like a broken plate
As your fingers ruffled the summer-still river.
Reflection made it more distant, and we had no bait
With which to catch the quick inflections of its
    light—
Only the taut insistence of memory.
How long it seemed till the water resettled, and
    sight
Pieced together again that cracked porcelain moon.
    We
Swam, bare as ourselves and the river we swam in,
Then deep in the shallows dead still we lay.

You will remember this now though you were
looking away:
Us wading ashore through the river's wet skin,
And clouds roll below us like shoals of grey salmon.

There Is One Comfort

MARILYN NORONHA

There is one comfort now,
I don't fear death.

At worst, it will be
an undisturbed repose
and I am very tired,
God knows.

At best it will mean happiness
that I have never known.
If I am with you, once more,
it will mean going home.

All the Words

SUNITI NAMJOSHI

All the words have leaped into air like the cards
in Alice, like birds flying, forming, re-
forming, swerving and rising, and each word
says it is love. The cat says it is love.
It says, 'I am and I love.' And the fawn
in the forest who lost his name, he eats
from your hand. He tells you, 'My name is love.'
And all the White Knight's baggage rattles, and cries
it is love. And even the tiger-lily, even the rose
say only that they are themselves. And they say
they are love. All the little words say
they are love, the space in between, the link
and logic of love. And I can make no headway
in this heady grammar, and suddenly
and here, you are, I am, and we love.

Cameo

PRABHANJAN MISHRA

The time is ripe
to hunger for God
rather than for each other, you say.

The thought lurks
in every nook, gathers
in every vibration
of this room. In shadows
around your eyes.
In your darkening lips.

In sleep's ebb
your hands stay awake
in my hands, searching
and untangling knots,
pulling aside the blinds.

Request

TARA PATEL

Sometimes for old time's sake
you should look me up.
Have lunch with me, I'll pay the bill.
How little I know you though I loved
you for so long,
and still do for old time's sake.

You cannot forget me so completely.
Remember me a little and meet me sometimes.
Once in a while, for good luck,
do not negate the past.
Indulge me.

Not because I want to embarrass you.
It is not your lack of love which distresses
me any more.
I'm no longer obsessed with a blind emotion
which promises everything and nothing.
You have to be young forever to be in love
like that.

I will not bore you with details of how I lived
for months after your exit.
But because I'm pining for an old pleasure,
have lunch with me one of these days.
I miss you most when I'm eating alone.

A man should look up a woman sometimes
for old time's sake.
For reasons other than those which are obsolete.
Have lunch with me,
I'll pay the bill.

Love Among the Pines

KEKI N. DARUWALLA

The animal evening moves
like the tiger-wind through the parting of reeds
The sky is not blue enough today
to catch the pure spiral of your thought
We walk in the cowdust, my fingers
lost in the spaces between your fingers
Some wild flowers catch your eye
and I sleepwalk through
some moments of wild talk about
        wild flowers from you

What makes me whisper
        destiny lies
    in the parting of hair
    in the parting of grasses
    in the parting of thighs?

Dusk explodes into black shrapnel
on the knife-rim of the earth.

What is there in my hand that when it sidles into
    your blouse
it prowls like an animal that makes you writhe?
turning your nipples into a black sprout of berries?

We sweep pineneedles into a stack
(they don't prick at all when vertically spread)
The pinecricket overhead is a shrill monotone

The moments stacked against each other
turn incandescent with a running flame
we both know what we are here for
        beneath your skin
of wild talk you are tense,
beneath the cindering ash of my body
your body is a surprise
for as I fall upon the earth-crust that is you
we spin, we spin, we spin
your feet pointed to the skies.

Wounded Vanity

MANOHAR SHETTY

Now that she has a wealthy husband
And a child, she has conveniently
Forgotten the past: the whispered promises,
The furtive touches, the private tears
The day they sealed the marriage deal
Under the family photographs.

Humming, dusting, cleaning and feeding her baby.
Waiting for the chime of the doorbell
With that absurd pretence of innocence,
She clings to the image of a domestic queen,
Treating me not as someone dead,
(even the dead arouse some sort of respect)
But as something else—a cupboard, a chair,
An inanimate object, never seen
Since it's always there.

I visit her apartment nevertheless,
In the cowardly guise of an old friend,
Not to pamper her child, or to observe
Her fall from grace, but to be suffused
In the sick warmth of self-induced pain.

Knees

IMTIAZ DHARKER

You can't take anything
for granted these days.

This bed is a boy
with knobbles for knees.
And I love you of course
but who knows how long?

Even potatoes sprout
unforeseen tusk and trunk
and we fall down
in ready adoration.

So don't shake anything inside my head.
Everything has its place
and I don't want it disturbed,
not even to be dusted,
do you understand?

Oh oh oh oh.

That was OK. Maybe
there's something to be said
for ignoring some of what I say.
Nothing's broken.
I just feel a bit
more rounded, suddenly.

The sofa cups its hands
And puts your fingers quite worshipfully
round my bottom while I watch TV.
This is nice. It doesn't take much
to make me happy.

I could live like this,
in deep belief,
indefinitely.

Of That Love

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

Of that love, of that mile
walked together in the rain,
only a weariness remains

I am that stranger now
my mirror holds to me;
the moment's silence
hardly moves across the glass
I pity myself in another's guise.

And no one's back here, no one
I can recognize, and from my side
I see nothing. Years have passed
since I sat with you, watching
the sky grow lonelier with cloudlessness,
waiting for your body to make it lived in.

One Moonlit December Night

SUDEEP SEN

One moonlit December night
you came knocking at my door,
I took my time to open.
When I did,
there was just a silk scarf,
frayed, half-stuck in the latch.

Some Questions I Want Answered

JERRY PINTO

We never had time to talk
And then I would not have known
What I wanted to ask.
Forgive me, ex-Significant Other
And let me ask them now.

My mother said she felt a click
When the sun inside her melted
To laughter and life at the sight
Of that writhing, relentless
Comic-come-courting.
Did you?

That wave-drenched suddenness
Is with me still. I walk there crunching
Perfect shells, dislodging crabs.
Do you walk with me?

The missed harvest of snow hibiscus and pain
The lonely moment of ceramic tiled fear

The mockery of diced papaya, wrought with lemon
and honey
Would it have been easier if you had shared it?

The second, split by decision.
The servant-girl's shades.
Your oiled hair.
The taxi.
And then another, doubling back.
The manoeuvres, the moves, the deceits
I would they were mine.
Do you believe me?

I can't remember what I said
But I remember your red nails flashing
Your teeth clamped in my wrist
Those moments, fevered, urgent, breathless.
So much like love, this final rage.
What did I say?

And this, I promise, will be the last.
Do you live in terror of a chance meeting
A semaphored recognition, a face jerked away?
For all these questions, I'll answer this one.
I do.

Usage

RUKMINI BHAYA NAIR

To use another, even to be used to her, seems
Insufficient, as if love's way remains the same.

So you left much unspoken when you said
My soft, fissured body was a habit you had.

That ploy's worn out, the shoe fits loose
Small wonder then we stray, footloose.

Among your secret thoughts, of which such
Quantities exist, some spill, one's about touch.

Because the form's thickened you called 'petite'
And my arms, on the inside, turned to putty

The swan-shape of my neck, once a single span
Now quite escapes this measure of your hand.

Before I did, you noticed new lines cut me up
In the rough contours of an unfamiliar map.

Therefore these minefields are dangerous,
Memory may blow us up like enemies, strangers.

If all we remember, is a firm bend of thigh
And the toss of limbs, we could fight shy.

Blundering, we must track our subterfuge,
For love's foot soldiers, the last refuge.

Survivors say courage matters, not luck,
Passionate argument, and the will to laugh.

It is better the sag-folds of my skin
Amuse you, than sadness haunt your ken.

Otherwise lust gains cover, and the dark signals
Only fugitive activity, furtive kiss and snuggle.

Escaping love's predictable range, we pursue
Ourselves, aliens we are entirely used to

With weapons unknown in early combat, minds
Naked and sharp, their latitude undefined.

Custom endures, endears, that's the secret
Of the many you've kept, the most indiscreet.

Hope's bubble, effervescent Alka-Seltzer,
Useful too, the trick is to change, to alter.

Give everything away, hidden sentiment, thought,
And love's self returns, via a different route.

Only a Street

ROBIN S. NGANGOM

Only a street, and one highway
came between my love and me.
I lived in a run-down neighbourhood
I have named the past.

There were nights that waited
until her window went black
and stories to finish in her secret room,
there were afternoons thirsting for a look
and rainbound evenings set free by desire.

So things died on me
because without her
I've forgotten how kisses take birth
or how a woman's sex tastes
and only an animal howls in my sleep.

One day, possessing very little
but winter and birds falling from cherry trees
I sent her a memento
hoping it would wreak havoc in her happy home.

Sailor's Log

JEET THAYIL

Tacked to the dark
swell of her back,

I wake up dreaming.
Morning

spills like milk
across the floor. Birds build

fractured arpeggios;
my friends in chaos.

They speak
the secret words I work to keep

safe in my chest.
Why say the rest?

I long to be
misery,

my race obscure in a crowded sea,
shipwrecked, dizzy,

free.

Vigil

ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

As shadows lengthen,
as the horizon smudges
into secrecy,
as the ocean withdraws
into a misty November opacity,
feelings begin to grow more medieval.

And I long for you
as other lovers have before me
in a great melodic deluge
awash through history,
veined silver with melancholy,
deep-throated, brine-flecked, with yearning.

Twilight is the light
for lyric poetry,
a stab of blue kingfisher poetry,
a small blaze of longing and regret
that is almost love,
too slight for immortality,
too intense to go unsung.

I almost understand now
why women in those poems I've ritually deplored
wandered over to their mirrors,
tracing against their lips
the wine-stain of an unforgotten passion,
coiling against their necks
seething torrents of hair
into a muted tempest,
still electric with desire.

And it feels like I too could
wait for you,
while I perform
the erotic liturgies of another world,
wait for you,
who understands like none other
the prosody of my breath,
wait for you
and you alone,

but only until the light fades, my love,
only until the light fades.

Ripe Apples

RANDHIR KHARE

You taste of ripe apples
When I hold your skin
To my mouth,
Tongue touching hair.

I know I shall lose you
When I find you;
And your thighs
Slipping from me,
Breaking my nets—
Will swim into the dark.

I shall awake alone,
A taste of ripe apples
On my lips.

A Letter in April

ADIL JUSSAWALLA

These are the shifting days of weather
When pods of blown, ignited clouds
Float and dwindle like burning cotton
Over the streetland's roofhilled red.
Parallel buildings crowd together,
The lonely grip a bridge of crowds,
Drifts of winter half-forgotten,
Fused to the railing like scraps of lead.

These are the tempting minutes of hope
When the darting eye must make its choice
Between the slim primeval wishes
Spawned from last year's weedwrapped acts.
Bobbing birches climb the slope
The tongueless turtle finds its voice,
The river bucks with pairing fishes,
Wildbloodstreams wreck our rooted facts.

And these are the sudden weeks of learning
From spinning winds; rewinding reels

Draw in their catch; windbaskets swing
Their captured charms and doodles out:
Fragments, letters, tickets returning
Scribble around my knocking heels.
Love, tell me you'll last the spring,
Shift this shifting weather out.

Bass Notes

MENKA SHIVDASANI

'How come your hair is so silky?'
the black musician asked, and she,
half-asleep, said Hong Kong was full of gloss
and sometimes the place got into your hair.

He was a professional, and they were playing
games with each other, fine-tuned notes
on silken skin. 'The trouble,' he said,
'is you're too sensitive,' and drew
music from the guitar strings on her head.

It was when he got to the bass
that something changed.
Later, he asked, anxious: 'Did you,
baby, did you?' for at a crucial moment,
there were silences that he didn't expect.

'I always come quietly,' she told him,
not adding, 'I always go quietly too.'

Kiwi Fruit

DINYAR GODREJ

Our love was like kiwi fruit
you gave me that I in the kitchen,
the secret sharer, partook.
The same quotidian covering
of plain brownpaper as our lives
were then; a humdrum innocence
so deceptive that when you took
a knife to it and split
it into halves, beneath the fuzz
an elsewhere jewel opened up.
Soon, as time ran out, I had
to leave, with a packed suitcase,
a packed heart and one long kiss,
simple in the car.
Now there is only languor
between assignments and the boredom
of expectancy. To this world
turned alien without you
I am a skin, one among many.
Only at night when the knife

of longing pierces me,
and you freeze in the film
of remembered gestures, does it
begin to breathe, this greenness
within me, something soft.

Love as Research

E.V. Ramakrishnan

In the archives of your looks
I study the manuscripts
of your sidelong glances.
The documents of your eloquent
gestures pile up in my
study. I subscribe to the bound
volumes of your serial
moods. I fumble and misquote
as I learn more and more
about your less and less.

There is no coming to terms
with your ancient scholarship.

Food of Love

ANJUM HASAN

Once I would eat breakfast
following the movement of
blue buses or staining a book,
but food now is an aspect of our love.

We've turned it into emotion—
red pickle like the night's heat, ice-creams
so smooth they enforce silence, orange-
flavoured kisses, conversations directed by rum.

We've dignified it with memories—Mr K's
Tender Coconut Soup like hot tears before
your going away, candy like sunlight
on the afternoon we lay in the park
in Kungsholmen, the apple wine we had
for breakfast last June, the duck you ate
with half your shirt buttons undone,
on the still boat in the seamless night.

We've gathered its crisp, exact names—
gazpacho, Cinzano, knäckebröd.

And it so allies us, I wonder
if there is anything like a solipsism of taste.

What, for instance, could hing mean
to your saltandpepper-accustomed tongue,
of what do lichees taste to you?

You

GERSON DA CUNHA

Everything about you
is you of course.
Not just your mole
and love of *dhrupad*,
the roses that you grow,
never phlox,
the marrying late of you.
But things more subtle too,
like your occurrences,
events you consider random.
The seatbelt you attracted
out of a clear sky
that to this day
scars your underlip.
Inevitable,
once your first cells mating
made no one else.
You will be invited in a bar
to Uganda, hear your name
on German radio

one Christmas night,
receive a philatelic journal
by mistake—all because
in your patterned yolk
a most particular force
fixed the quick and contour
of your moments.

What will you change?

Making Out

SMITA AGARWAL

As always, below a benign
sun, under a wide-open sky,
trees dozing in the wind,

we make love;
no bodies touching, not a sound;
locked-in eyes…

You shrink into yourself. All of
your six feet seem to be folding
up. Your loose clothes are flapping
in the wind—

Your scooter helmet's foam inner
lining is torn. You are greying.
You are balding. You're tongue-tied
and blushing—

A teenager overwhelmed by
his first love.

Lines Written to Mothers Who Disagree with Their Sons' Choices of Women

KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH

For managing to love
an object of scorn,
they place around my neck
a garland of threats.

And the world is cold this winter,
cold as the matrimonial column
they lecture to my sewn-shut ears,
or the stares that stalk
the woman of my choice.

But the cherries are pink
and festive as her love.

Leave cherries to winter, mother,
love to seasoned lovers.

Your Eyes, Glad and Wondering

RUSKIN BOND

Your eyes, glad and wondering,
Dwelt in mine.
And all that stood between us
Was a blade of grass
Trembling
In the breath from our lips.

But grass will bend.

The world swings around.
The sky spins, the trees go hush
Hush, the mountain sings—
Though we must leave this space.
We're trapped forever in a little space
One last sweet phantom kiss.

Daffodils

MEENA ALEXANDER

Kasuya Eiichi, poet of Japan,
knows a place where daffodils bloom,
a dark damp place, where hair cut
from heads of young girls
sharpens the wind,
where a moon soars over a cliff
and syllables of speech
melt into petals—ochre petals.

I will ask him to take me there,
into that swamp of dreams.
When underground water seeps into my wrists
I'll cry out through the mists:

Come, look, I'll not flash
daffodil flesh at you. I am older,
I have two children now,
my breasts are jugs of blood,
my hair black with silver

running through makes a pillow for my man,
his thighs
cut from river mud,
belly gold with longing.

*Distance**

RUTH VANITA

As the scooter speeds away from where you are,
each crossing less revocable, I think,
In the myths they always stood on separate shores,
Sohni-Mahiwal, Hero and Leander.
But the river is not water nor even
Heartless streets overrun with swarming traffic.
The river is not to be measured in miles.
The river is more. Able to drown, deeper
Than feeling or thought, indifferent to fragments
Of desire—the river is all that went before.

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* This poem, like all the poems in *Play of Light*, was written to a woman.

Typed with One Finger

DOM MORAES

Travel with me on the long road
into loneliness, where the hours
offer pardons to those still afraid.
Bursts of white and blue flowers
will surprise you in summer, with
denials of what is called death.
When I am not there in the maze
where the long roads ends, think
of the clumsy stutter of my limp
behind you always, hindering you,
trying to help you, all my days.

Every word that I wrote was true
this way or that, meant to praise
whatever was worth it on earth.
When my thumb, slowly flexed,
erased vexed lines from your brow,
it did more than my typing finger
achieved in those seasons, for that,
over the endless miles of paper,

scratched in marks like crowsfeet.
And so there were always reasons
how our lives became complete.
For me the main one was I loved you.

Lice

ARUN KOLATKAR

1

She hasn't been a woman for very long,
that girl who looks
like a stick of cinnamon.

Yes, the one in the mustard coloured sari
and red glass bangles,
sitting on that upright concrete block

as if it were a throne
though it's hardly broad enough
for a kitten to curl up on.

The slender wooden pillar
of the Wayside Inn porch
rises behind her

like some kind of exotic backrest
—how well it seems to fit
the space between her shoulder blades.

2

She has been talking nonstop,
jabbering away like this
and laughing so much all day,

because they let him out of jail this morning
and her dirty no-good lover
is back with her again.

Just look at him, the yob
—the one sitting on the ground
with an arm wrapped around her legs.

She is holding court,
gesticulating from time to time
with her hands like sparrows.

How raptly he's listening to her, that fellow
with a foot on the fender
and an elbow on the bonnet of a parked Fiat.

She has them all spellbound;
but not for one moment has she forgotten
that she has a job on her hands.

3

Her lover's lousy head,
pillowed on her thighs,
has become a harp in her hands.

As her fairy fingers run through his hair,
producing arpeggios of lice
and harmonics of nits,

as bangles softly tinkle over him,
he drifts off and dreams
that he's holed up in a mossy cave

behind a story-telling waterfall
booby-trapped with rainbows,
and hears the distant bark of police dogs.

Notes on Contributors

A.K. Ramanujan (1929–1993) was a distinguished scholar, poet and translator. His books include *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1967), and *Second Sight* (1985), all collections of poetry in English. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1976 and the MacArthur Prize Fellowship in 1983.

Adil Jussawalla is a senior poet, critic and anthologist. He has written two books of poetry, *Land's End* (1962) and *Missing Person* (1976), edited an influential anthology, *New Writing in India* (1974), and co-edited *Statements* (1976), an anthology of Indian prose in English.

Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001) was an acclaimed poet and translator. He received a PhD in English from Pennsylvania State University (1984) and MA in creative writing from the University of Arizona (1985). His books of poetry in English include *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003), and *The Rebel's Silhouette* (1995), translations of a selection of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's Urdu poems.

Anand Thakore is a poet and Hindustani vocalist. His first collection of poetry, *Waking in December*, was published in 2001. His poems have also appeared in *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets*.

Anita Nair is the author of two best-selling novels, *Ladies Coupé* (2001) and *The Better Man* (1999), both published by Penguin Books India. She is also the author of *Malabar Mind*, a book of poems. She lives in Bangalore.

Anjum Hasan works at the India Foundation for the Arts. Her poems have been published in a number of journals including *Indian Literature*, *Chandrabhaga*, *Kavya Bharati* and *Critical Quarterly* (UK). Her work has also been included in *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets*.

Arun Kolatkar (1932–2004) has been a major presence in Indian literature. A bilingual poet who wrote in English and Marathi, his first book in English, *Jejuri* (1976), won him the Commonwealth Prize, ran into three editions and was translated into German. In 2004, two more books in English were published to wide acclaim: *Kala Ghoda Poems* and *Sarpa Satra*.

C.P. Surendran is a poet and journalist. His collections of poetry include *Gemini 1*, *Posthumous Poems* and *Canaries on the Moon*. His poems have been featured in *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets*.

Charmayne D'Souza is a poet, counsellor and family therapist. Her first collection of poems, *A Spelling Guide to Women*, appeared in 1990. Her poems have been published in various journals like the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, the *Sahitya Akademi Journal*, *P.E.N.*, and the *Sunday Observer*, among others.

Dilip Chitre is a senior bilingual poet and translator. His first book of poems in Marathi, *Kavita*, appeared in 1960. He has edited *An Anthology of Marathi Poetry: 1945–65* and has published *Says Tuka* (1991), a translation of the works of saint–poet Tukaram. His poetry collections in English include *Travelling in a Cage* and *The Mountain*.

Dinyar Godrej grew up in Indore, studied in Mumbai and Oxford, and now lives in the Netherlands. His poetry, along with that of two other poets, appeared in *Twentysomething* (London, 1992) and in a flurry of anthologies soon after. His non-fiction book, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Climate Change* (2002), has been translated into several languages. He is one of the editors of the global justice issues magazine, *New Internationalist*.

Dom Moraes (1938–2004) has been an important presence in Indian poetry in English. He won the Hawthornden Prize in 1957 for his first collection of poems, *A Beginning*. Other collections include *Poems* (1960), *John Nobody* (1965), *Beldam Etcetera* (1967), *Collected Poems* (1987), *Serendip* (1990), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award, *In Cinnamon Shade* (2001), *Typed*

With One Finger (2003), and *Collected Poems 1954–2004*. He was also a well-known prose writer, journalist and foreign correspondent.

E.V. Ramakrishnan is a noted English and Malayalam literary critic and poet. He has written three books of poems and one collection of critical essays in English, and edited four books of criticism in Malayalam, an anthology of Indian poetry in English translation and a collection of critical essays in English. He is currently professor of English in the Department of English, South Gujarat University, Surat.

Eunice de Souza taught English literature at St Xavier's College, Mumbai, for over thirty years and retired as the head of the English department. Her collections of poetry include *Fix*, *Women in Dutch Painting* and *Ways of Belonging: New and Selected Poems*. She has also edited *Nine Indian Women Poets* and is the author of two novels, several children's books, essays, book reviews and criticism.

Gayatri Majumdar is a Kolkata-based poet. Her first collection of poems, *Shout*, appeared in 2000. She is also the editor of a literary journal, *The Brown Critique*.

Gerson da Cunha is a poet, stage actor and urban activist. After a long career in advertising, he moved on to a decade-long stint in UNICEF, his work taking him to many countries. Today he works actively with child relief

and citizens' action groups in Mumbai. He is the author of *So Far*, a collection of poems.

Gieve Patel is a doctor and a poet. His books of poetry include *Poems* (1966), *How Do You Withstand, Body* (1976) and *Mirrored, Mirroring* (1991). He is also an important contemporary Indian painter and his works are included in private and museum collections in India, Europe and America.

Imtiaz Dharker is a poet, painter and documentary film-maker. Her collections of poetry include *Purdah*, *Postcards from God* and *I Speak for the Devil*. As an artist she conceives her books as sequences of poems and drawings.

Jayanta Mahapatra is a senior poet and editor. His collections of poetry include *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *The False Start* (1980), *Life Signs* (1983), *Dispossessed Nests* (1986), *Selected Poems* (1987), *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988), and *The Temple* (1989). He won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981 and is the editor of *Chandrabhaga*, a literary biannual.

Jeet Thayil is a poet, short fiction writer and journalist. His books of poetry include *Gemini 2*, *Apocalypso* and *English*. His poems have also been published in *London Magazine*, *Verse*, *The Independent*, *Poetry Review*, *Rialto*, among other publications. He lives in New York where he teaches and writes poetry.

Kamala Das is a prolific bilingual writer. She writes as Madhavikutty in Malayalam and as Kamala Das in English. Her poetry collections include *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, to name a few. She is the recipient of the PEN Asian Poetry Prize (1963) and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award.

Keki Daruwalla is a prolific poet, fiction writer and anthologist. His collections of poetry include *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971), *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1970), *The Keeper of the Dead* (1982), *Landscapes* (1987), *A Summer of Tigers* (1995), *Night River* (2000) and *The Map-maker* (2002). He has also edited *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960–1980*.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih lives in Shillong and works as a deputy director, Publications, at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU). He also edits the university newsletter, *NEHU News*, the university journal, *The NEHU Journal*, and the first-ever poetry magazine in Khasi, *Rilum*. He has published extensively in both Khasi and English, including two volumes of poetry, *Moments* and *The Sieve*. He recently co-edited *An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*. He is the recipient of the first North-East Poetry Award conferred in 2004 by the North-East India Poetry Council, Tripura.

Mamta Kalia is the author of more than twenty books in Hindi and English, including poetry, short fiction,

novels and plays. She has taught in colleges at Delhi and Mumbai. Her poems have appeared in *Nine Indian Women Poets*, edited by Eunice de Souza. She is currently the Director, Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad, Kolkata.

Manohar Shetty is a poet, short fiction writer, anthologist, editor and journalist. He has two collections of verse to his credit: *A Guarded Space* (1981) and *Borrowed Time* (1988). He lives in Panjim and is the editor of *Goa Today*.

Marilyn Noronha is a long-standing member of the Mumbai Poetry Circle. She also writes plays and short fiction for children. Her first book of poems, *Different Faces*, was published in 2004.

Masud Taj is an architect and oral poet who has been reciting his poetry to diverse audiences in venues as varied as the Kingdom Café in the red-light area of Amsterdam and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. He was featured in the anthology *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets*. His poems have appeared in *Poiesis*, *The Hindu: Folio*, *Orbis* and the *Indian P.E.N. Quarterly*, among other journals.

Meena Alexander is a poet and novelist. Her works include *Raw Silk* (2004), *Illiterate Heart* (winner of a 2002 PEN Open Book Award) and *River and Bridge* (1995). Her memoir *Fault Lines* (*Publishers Weekly*'s Best Books of 1993) was reissued in an expanded edition in 2003.

She has edited the anthology *Indian Love Poems* (Everyman's Library/ Knopf, 2005). She is Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Centre, City University of New York.

Menka Shivdasani is the founder-member of the Mumbai Poetry Circle and a poet and journalist. She is the author of *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* and *Stet*. Her work has appeared in various anthologies.

Prabhanjan Mishra has been the president of the Mumbai Poetry Circle for several years. A poet and translator, his books of poetry include *Vigil* (1993) and *Lips of a Canyon* (2000).

Randhir Khare is a poet, translator, short fiction, fable and travel writer, and journalist. His books include *Thirteen Poems*, *Hunger*, *The Circle*, *Swimming into the Dark*, *Survivors*, *Return to Mandhata* and *The Dangs: Journey into the Heartland*, among others. He has also worked on translations of Bhil poetry in his book *The Singing Bow*.

Ranjit Hoskoté is a poet, cultural theorist and independent curator. His collections of poetry include *Zones of Assault* (1991), *The Cartographer's Apprentice* (2000) and *The Sleepwalker's Archive* (2001). He has also edited a Penguin anthology of poetry, *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* (2002).

Robin Ngangom was born in Imphal, Manipur, and

teaches literature at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He has published two collections of poetry, *Words and the Silence*, and *Time's Crossroads*. His poems have appeared in *Verse*, *The New Statesman*, and *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair is professor of Linguistics and English at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. Her collections of poetry *The Hyoid Bone* (1992), *The Ayodhya Cantos* (2000) and *Yellow Hibiscus: New and Selected Poems* (2005) have been published by Penguin Books India. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry International* (2004), *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* (2002) and the anthology *Mosaic*.

Ruskin Bond has written over a hundred short stories, essays and novellas, and more than thirty books for children. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992 and the Padma Shri in 1999.

Ruth Vanita is a poet, writer, teacher, editor and translator. She was one of the founders of *Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society*, of which she was also co-editor from 1979 to 1990. She now teaches at the University of Montana. She has written widely on Indian women's issues, and has translated many works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry by and about women, from Hindi to English. Her book of poems, *A Play of Light: Selected Poems*, was published by Penguin Books India in 1994.

Smita Agarwal is a poet, Hindustani vocalist, and Reader in English at the University of Allahabad. Her poems have been published in *Kavya Bharati*, *Scoria*, *Poetry India: Voices Within*, among other journals and anthologies. Her first collection of poems, *Wish-granting Words*, appeared in 2001.

Sudeep Sen's (www.sudeepsen.com) poetry collections include *Leaning Against the Lamppost* (1983), *The Lunar Visitations* (1990), *Kali in Ottava Rima* (1992), *New York Times* (1993), *South African Woodcut* (1994), *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames* (1994), *Dali's Twisted Hands* (1995), *Postmarked India: New and Selected Poems* (1997), *Lines of Desire* (2000), *Monsoon* (2002), *Prayer Flag* (2003) and *Distracted Geographies* (2004). His work has appeared in the *TLS*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Observer*, *London Magazine*, *Literary Review* and *Harvard Review*; and he is the recipient of the Hawthornden Fellowship, Pushcart Prize nomination, Faber & Faber grant, and Pleiades honour. Sen is the editorial director for *Aark Arts* (Books), and an editor of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Orient Express*, *New Quest*, and *Six Seasons Review*. He lives and works in New Delhi and London.

Sujata Bhatt is a graduate of the Writers' Workshop, University of Iowa. Her poems have been widely anthologized and have been translated into more than a dozen languages. She has published several collections of poetry. *Brunizem* (1993) and *My Mother's Way of Wearing a Sari* (2000) were published by Penguin Books India, the former winning the Commonwealth Poetry Prize.

Suniti Namjoshi has published five books of poetry in India and three in Canada, including *The Authentic Lie* (1982) and *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* (1984). Some of her other books include *Flesh and Paper* (1986), a sequence of poems with Gillian Hanscombe, and *Because of India: Selected Poems* (1989). She lives in England.

Tara Patel is a columnist and poet, and author of a well-received book of poems, *Single Woman* (1991). She lives in Goa where she writes for the popular press.

Vikram Seth is an acclaimed novelist and travel writer. He has published five books of poems, *Mappings*, *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, *Beastly Tales from Here and There*, and *Three Chinese Poets: Translations*.

Vinay Dharwadker received a postgraduate degree in physics from the University of Delhi and a PhD in South Asian Studies from the University of Chicago. He has edited *The Columbia Book of Indian Poetry* and is the author of a book of poems, *Sunday at the Lodi Gardens* (1994).

The editors regret their ignorance of matters related to **Bhikaiji Maneckji**. Any information that we receive will be incorporated into future editions.

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'Waking' by Vinay Dharwadker, *Sunday at the Lodi Gardens*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1994

'Leaving Your City' by Agha Shahid Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, Oxford University Press, Mumbai, 1987

'Prandial Plaint' by Vikram Seth, *Collected Poems*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi

'Strawberry Morning' by Ranjit Hoskoté, *Zones of Assault*, Rupa & Co, Kolkata, 1991

'Alibi' by Eunice de Souza, *Women in Dutch Painting*, Praxis, Mumbai, 1988

'White Asparagus' by Sujata Bhatt, *Point No Point*, Carcanet Press Limited, Manchester, 1997

'The Ageing Lovers' by Bhikaiji Maneckji, *An Anthology of Indo-English Love Poetry*, edited by Subhas C. Saha, Prayer Books, Kolkata, 1976

'I Would Like to Have a Movie Cowboy for a Husband' by Charmayne D'Souza, *A Spelling Guide to Women*, Disha Books, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1991

'Enemy' by C.P. Surendran, *Canaries on the Moon*, Yeti Books, Calicut, 2003

'Travelling in a Cage (Section 6)' by Dilip Chitre, *Travelling in a Cage*, Clearing House, Mumbai, 1980

'Licence' by Gieve Patel, *How Do You Withstand, Body*, Clearing House, Mumbai, 1976

'Antenna' by Gayatri Majumdar, *Shout*, Sampark, Kolkata

'Mirror Love' by H. Masud Taj, previously unpublished

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